

How have attitudes toward social class in relation to civil disobedience been represented by the British mainstream media in the contemporary political history of Britain?

About this study

The events of 1981 and 2011 are some of the most well-known cases of civil disobedience in contemporary British history [1]. This study analysed articles within the editions of four national newspapers in the five-working days following the events: The Guardian; The Daily Mirror; The Daily Telegraph; and The Daily Express. A comparison between the findings of each content analysis was then completed to achieve a broader picture of attitudes towards social class. In 1981, there was a more implicit divide between the left-wing and right-wing attitudes, however, in 2011, a more explicit divide can be observed. The study concluded that there is a negative attitude towards lower social classes as represented in newspapers. This poster is a condensed visual summary of the findings.

1981: The Brixton Riots

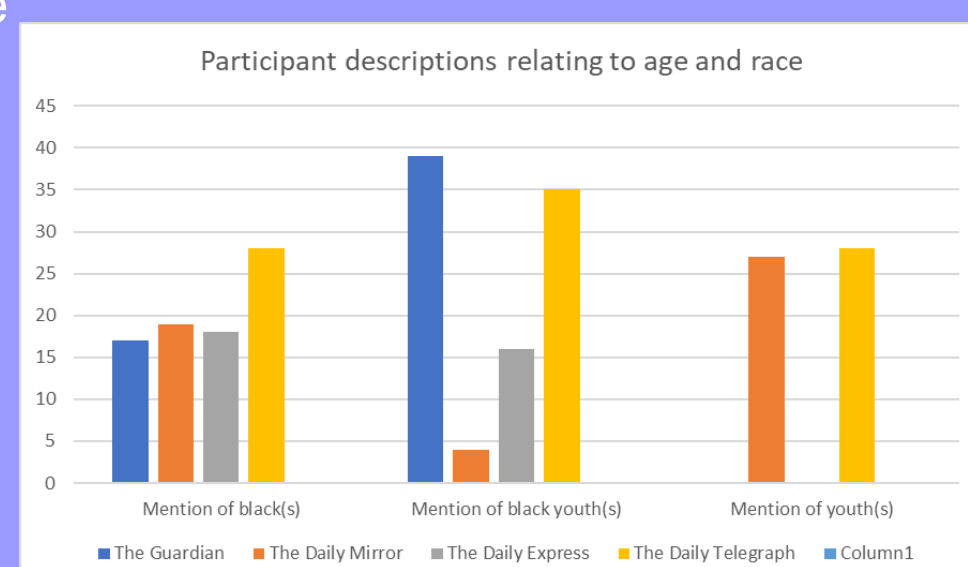
Events

The events of 1981 most frequently referred to property damage such as looting and arson. The property-focussed descriptions were most common in the right-wing tabloid and broadsheet.

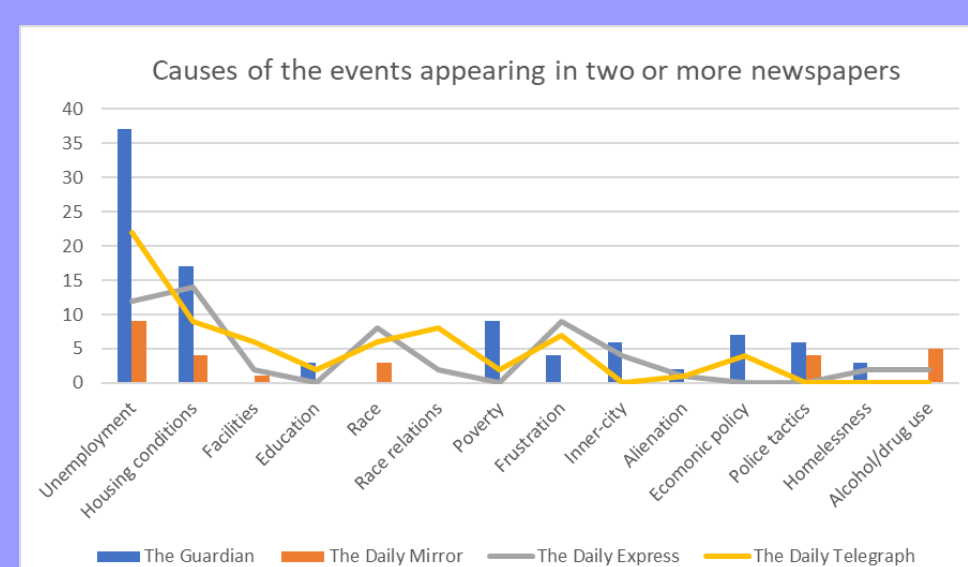
Participants

There was a significantly high mention of the race of participants (as seen in the graph below) following the 1981 events. An illustration of this is descriptions of a “black army” and “a mob of rampaging black youths”. This is important as the class of participants could then be inferred from their race rather than explicit descriptions of class.

“Brixton rioting flares again as police move in” [3]



“economically and socially disadvantaged” [4]



“no excuse for mob violence, looting and arson” [5]

Causes

Across all four newspapers, the most-referenced causes of the events were considered unemployment and poor housing. This implies it is due to being affected by low social class is a cause for rioting. The left-wing newspapers considered police tactics as a cause whereas the right-wing newspapers did not. In contrast, the right-wing newspapers favoured race as a cause of the riots.

2011: The Tottenham Riots

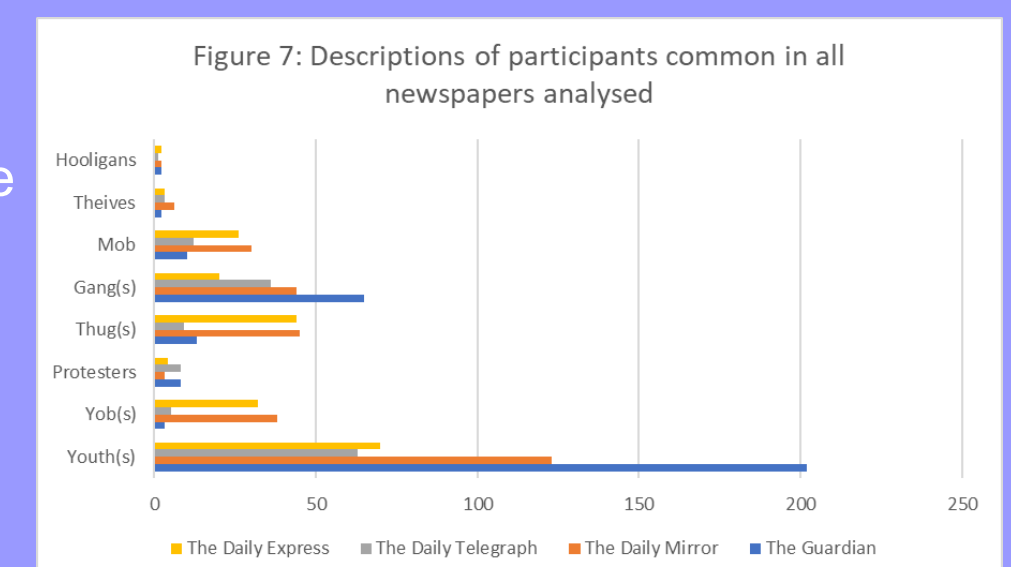
Events

As with the descriptions of the 1981 events, looting and arson were the most frequently cited following descriptions of riots. The implication of this continuation is that property remains a significant value in the societies of both times.

Participants

Descriptions of participant's social class was much more explicitly referenced following the 2011 events. ‘Youths’ were most commonly referenced in all cases, which is an implicit reference to low social class due to high youth unemployment at the time [2]. Explicit reference to class such as ‘yob’ and ‘underclass’ were also used frequently, demonstrating more explicit descriptions of class.

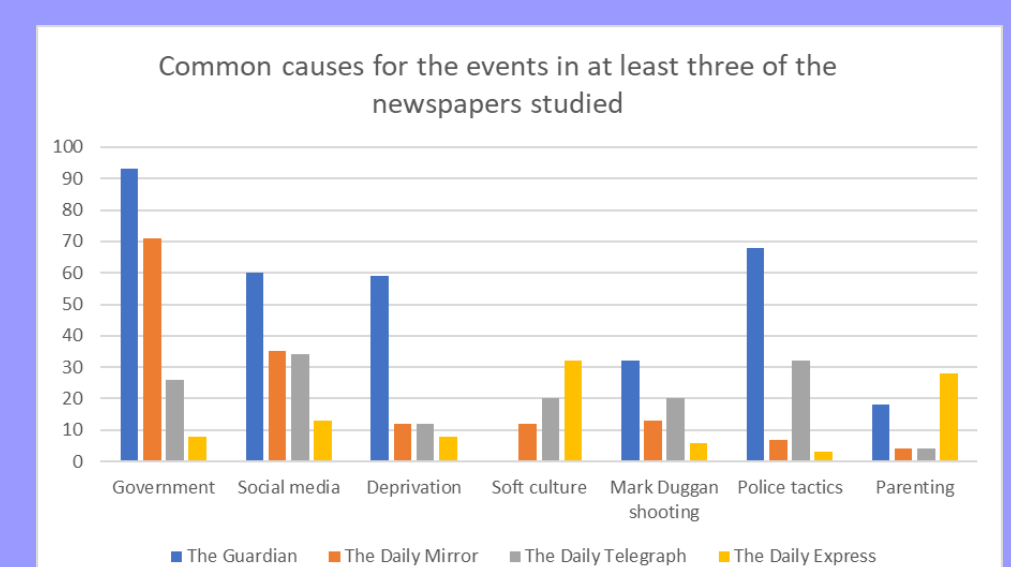
“Police attacked as London burns” [6]



“brazen young crooks” [7]

Causes

The causes of the 2011 events differed significantly between the left-wing and right-wing newspapers. The left-leaning broadsheet and tabloid cited the government and its actions as the primary cause, whereas the right-wing newspapers considered social media and ‘soft culture’ to blame.



“once-proud businesses were mindlessly burnt out” [8]

References: The Daily Telegraph (1981), The Daily Telegraph (2011), The Daily Express (1981), The Daily Express (2011), The Daily Mirror (1981), The Daily Mirror (2011), The Guardian (1981), The Guardian (2011)

[1a] Unsworth, C. (1982). ‘The Riots of 1981: Popular Violence and the Politics of Law and Order’. *Journal of Law and Society*. 9(1). pp:63-85.

[1b] Briggs, D. (2012). *The English Riots of 2011: The Summer of Discontent*. Hook: Waterside Press Ltd.

[2] Office of National Statistics. (2019) ‘LFS: Unemployed: UK: All: Aged 18-24: Thousands: Seasonally Adjusted’. ONS. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/timeseries/ybvn/lms> (Accessed: 28/02/19)

[3] Mackie, L., Phillips, M., McHardy, A., Cook, S., Keel, P. and Davies, N. (1981). ‘Brixton rioting flares again as police move in’. *The Guardian*. April 13. p:1.

[4] Cannon, T. (1981). ‘Letters to the Editor: Brixton: blood on the streets and the fire next time’. *The Guardian*. April 15. p:12.

[5] Davies, M., Martin, A., Atkinson, S., Webber, G., and McCarthy, M. (1981). ‘Mirror Comment’. *The Daily Mirror*. April 13. p:2.

[6] Lewis, P., Taylor, M. and Quinn, B. (2011). ‘Police attacked as London burns’. *The Guardian*. August 8. p:1.

[7] Parry, R. and Turnbull, G. B. (2011). ‘Capital is robbed blind as looters show off online’. *The Daily Mirror*. August 9. p:7.

[8] Flanagan, P. (2011). ‘Terror is worst since the Blitz’. *The Daily Express*. August 10. p:5.